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John Ruskin

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**Oxford University Extension Lectures,**

1901.

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**John Ruskin :  
Ethical and Religious Teacher.**

A LECTURE

DELIVERED AT OXFORD, AUGUST, 1901,

BY THE

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Sometime Fellow of Balliol College.

**Oxford :**

ALDEN & Co. LTD., 35, CORN-MARKET STREET.

LONDON : SIMPKIN, MARSHALL, HAMILTON, KENT AND Co. LTD.

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THREE of the most interesting and distinguished men of letters of the Victorian era—Robert Browning the poet, Charles Kingsley the novelist, John Ruskin the art-critic—all in the first days of consciousness, before they could read or write, at the age of three or four years, signalized the beginning of their careers and foreshadowed their life-motives by preaching sermons. The subject matter of Browning's has not been recorded. It survives only in the famous parenthetic aside, due to the interruptions of an unappreciative baby-sister, "Pew-opener, remove that child." Kingsley's discourse is personal, practical, slightly heretical. "It is not right to fight," it begins. "Religion," it concludes, "is reading good books, doing good actions, not telling lies and speaking evil and calling *their* brother Fool and Raca." Ruskin's first sermon, delivered before he was three, is brief but characteristic. "People," said the little child, "be good. If you are good, God will love you. If you are not good, God will not love you. People, be good."

And on that simple text John Ruskin preached all his life through. We think of him too exclusively as a critic of painting and sculpture, or as an enthusiastic worshipper of loveliness in Nature. A thorough examination of all his works will dispel that view.

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He is primarily and above all things else a moralist, an ethical and religious teacher: from first to last a preacher, by profession and by bent, in gifts and in failings, in the bed-rock purpose and aim of his life. If I were called upon to define him, I should say this. He was a man "who cared for Nature more than Art; for Humanity more than Nature; for the glory of God most of all." For Art pure and simple, it may be seriously questioned whether he truly felt. "Ruskin's strongest points," says Dr. Waldstein, "and greatest achievements are not to be found in the domain and criticism of Art. . . Art as such does not respond to the natural bent of his mind." I know well that a distinguished French writer, De la Sizeranne, has maintained that "passionate love of Nature was Ruskin's Alpha and Omega," and that he discusses morality, industry, and religion in order to lead us up to a higher sense of Art. None of us will deny the passionate love of Nature, but the rest of the judgment is misleading and gives no clue. The English critic who has written with completest insight and subtlest comprehension on Ruskin's work, Frederic Harrison, has found the truth. "John Ruskin began," he says, "by preaching to us a higher sense of Art, in order to lead us up to a truer understanding of morality, industry, religion, and humanity."

There is the secret, then. Art is the text, right living is the sermon. The devotees of the formula, 'Art for Art's sake' are perfectly justified in their hostility. It is not wonderful that so many of our painters to-day, especially those under the influence of French

ideas, ridicule his theories and smile pityingly at the mention of his name. "Art," they say, "is its own religion, its own morality; and we want neither Bible nor missal to show us how to paint." "That," blurted out Tennyson once in his rough way, "is the road to Hell"; and Ruskin would have agreed with him. Though he repudiated the name, he was a Puritan at heart. He loved Fra Angelico and could not understand Raphael. Religion and Ethics and Art were all to him inextricably intermingled. "Art," he wrote in the first volume of *Modern Painters*, "has for its business to praise God": in the last volume, "Art is the expression of delight in God's work." Why you might almost believe that Ruskin, of the same race as John Knox, trained by Scottish parents, was here but re-echoing the Shorter Catechism of Scotland learnt at his mother's knee: "What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him for ever." To those who believe that Art is simply unmoral, that the sole business of the artist is to paint anything he sees as he sees it, to our modern gifted delineators of butchers' shops and executions and surgical operations, no teacher could seem more fantastic and foolish than this man who demanded noble life from the painter, and something of the divine in his work.

So too with the Political Economists who were outraged forty years ago by the doctrine of *Unto This Last*. What was their chief complaint against Ruskin? It was that just as formerly he had intruded Ethics into *Æsthetics*, so now he was trying to complicate the pure science of political economy by ethical

considerations, by enquiring not so much how man lives but how he ought to live, by asking not how societies may attain *wealth* in the sense of material commodities, but rather *weal-th*, well-being, the true riches of human existence. "There is no wealth," he had proclaimed in a memorable sentence, "but Life! Life, including all its powers of love, of joy, of admiration. That country is the richest which nourishes the greatest number of noble and happy beings." The Political Economy, or Plutonomy rather, of fifty years ago chose to regard man as merely "a covetous machine." Ruskin chose to regard him as influenced by affection as well as by greed, by humanity as well as by supply and demand, by justice as well as self-interest. "He deliberately lays down," it has been rightly said, "an ethical standard of conduct for the art of Political Economy, the acceptance of which entirely alters the nature of the science."

Furthermore, let me ask this question. Why is it that the majority of us, when we study earnestly Ruskin's writings, even if we care little about his Political Economy or his Art theories, are somehow exasperated, repelled, driven into revolt? Let me make a confession. There have been times in my life when I have hated his very name. There are passages in his books that I hardly dare read. Why is it? It is because he is the most remorseless, relentless, disquieting, terrifying Christian teacher of modern days,—terrifying because he is so convincing to both reason and conscience. Tolstoi one may cast aside. He is a literalist, has no understanding of oriental metaphors, is still in the



bonds of worn-out asceticism. But Ruskin's rendering of Christianity into modern terms is so dreadfully sane, so horribly unanswerable, and yet contravenes the whole course and tenour of average Christian lives.

There is an impression in some quarters that Ruskin was exceedingly unorthodox, almost a sceptic, not distinctively Christian at all. No misapprehension could be more profound. The trouble is that he is too absolutely Christian, and takes the Sermon on the Mount seriously. Many good things, no doubt, may be predicated of modern English religion, its tolerance, its reverence, its intense desire for truth; but we can scarcely claim for it that it has made any real attempt to apply the revolutionary ethics of the Sermon on the Mount to either individual or national life. If any teacher dares to do that, the common sense of the English folk sets him down immediately as foolish, Utopian, or fanatical. "He had hold of the Gospel," writes a modern Agnostic of Ruskin, "that God-fearing, Bible-reading Englishmen *profess* to have hold of. He simply set himself to carry out literally into practical life some of the things that ordinary men and women profess to observe in church on Sundays. He took his Bible and acted on it, come what might, and Bible Christians now mock at him for so doing."

In a measure he has deserved it. What right has any man to make his fellow-creatures so intensely miserable as Ruskin makes us? A bright young girl is going to her first ball, in a lovely dress upon which half-a-dozen sempstresses have laboured for weeks. She chances just before setting forth to take up a

little book entitled *A Joy for Ever*, and this is what she reads. "I make no general assertions against splendour of dress, or pomp of accessories of life, but I say, that as long as there are cold and nakedness in the land around you, so long there can be no question at all but that splendour of dress is a crime. If the veil could be lifted from your human sight, you would see—the angels do see—on those gay white dresses of yours, strange dark spots, and crimson patterns that you know not of—spots of the inextinguishable red that all the sea cannot wash away: yes, and among the pleasant flowers that crown your fair heads, and flow on your wreathed hair, you would see that one weed was always twisted which no one thought of—the grass that grows on graves."

A joy for ever indeed! never to see again the lovely white robe without that crimson stain! Out upon the man! One longs for an answer to him, for some flaw in his pitiless, inexorable analysis, and there is none. "Consider," he wrote in the concluding passage of *Unto This Last*, "whether, even supposing it guiltless, luxury would be desired by any of us, if we saw clearly at our sides the suffering which accompanies it in the world. Luxury is indeed possible in the future—innocent and exquisite; luxury for all, and by the help of all; but luxury at present can only be enjoyed by the ignorant; the cruelest man living could not sit at his feast, unless he sat blindfold. Raise the veil boldly; face the light."

"Raise the veil boldly; face the light," whatever it reveals? It is the very last thing the majority of us

desire. We require of our prophets, not that they shall tell us the truth, but that they shall prophesy smooth things. Cheerful eulogists of our time, crass Philistines and worshippers of material comfort and villa-dom like Lord Macaulay, are dear to our hearts. Do you remember how, in his famous third chapter of the History, he scoffs at England in the seventeenth century for her scanty wealth, and exults even at the growth of suburban London. "The town," he writes, "did not as now fade by imperceptible degrees into the country. No long avenues of villas, embowered in lilacs and laburnums, extended from the great centre of wealth and civilisation almost to the boundaries of Middlesex." The nineteenth century was ten times as rich as the seventeenth, and had a hundred times as many villas! What more could you wish? Then comes this tiresome Ruskin and spoils it all. Here is Suburban London as it appears to him. "Sydenham and Penge," he writes in *Fors Clavigera*, "are now covered by many thousands of houses built within the last ten years, of rotten brick, with various devices to hold it together. They are fastened in a Siamese-twin manner together by their sides, and each couple has a Greek or Gothic portico shared between them, with magnificent steps, and highly ornamental capitals. Attached to every double-block are exactly similar double-parallelgrams of garden, laid out in new gravel and scanty turf, and enclosed by high, thin, and pale brick walls. The gardens in front are fenced from the road with an immense weight of cast-iron, and entered between two square gate-posts, with projecting stucco cornices,

bearing the information that the eligible residence within is Mortimer House or Montague Villa. Opposite one sees Burleigh House, or Devonshire Villa, still to let, and getting leprous in patches all over the fronts."

"Think what the real state of life is, for the people who are content to pass it in such places. Of the men, their wives and children, probably not the fifth part are possessed of one common manly or womanly skill, knowledge, or means of happiness. The men can indeed write, and cast accounts, and go to town every day to get their living by doing so ; the women and children can perhaps read story-books, dance in a vulgar manner, and play on the piano with dull dexterities for exhibition. Of books they read *Macmillan's Magazine* on week-days and *Good Words* on Sundays, and are entirely ignorant of all the standard literature belonging to their own country or any other. They cannot enjoy their gardens, for they have neither sense nor strength enough to work in them. The women and girls have no pleasures but in calling upon each other in false hair, cheap dresses of gaudy stuffs, machine-made, and high-heeled boots : the men have no faculty beyond that of cheating in business, no pleasures but in smoking or eating ; and no ideas, nor any capacity of forming ideas, of anything that has yet been done of great, or seen of good, in this world."

Humorous exaggeration, no doubt : and merciless satire ; but in the main the ghastly picture is true to fact. It is disturbing to our equanimity, but what wonder is it that a man like Ruskin, hater of ugliness

and shams and untruth and vulgarity, should be moved to furious anger by modern civilization, so-called. "His attacks on modern society," writes Mr. Leslie Stephen, "might be caricatures, but clearly there were very ugly things to caricature. When I read *Fors* I used always to fancy that I could confute him, and yet to feel uncomfortable that he might be essentially in the right. The evils which had stung so fine a nature to such wrath must at least be grievous."

In nothing perhaps that he has written has Ruskin given greater offence to good and gentle persons than in his angry denunciations of average English religion. When his famous *Letters to the Clergy on the Lord's Prayer* were printed in the *Contemporary Review* in 1879, many of the clergy replied with indignant protest. "He is practically a Manichean," wrote Archer Gurney strangely. "He fails plainly to grasp the truth that God 'giveth us richly all things to enjoy.'" "I care less than nothing," another replied curtly, "for anything Mr. Ruskin may write outside the subject of Art." "Let the cobbler stick to his last," was the easy retort from most of the brethren. One clergyman, however, my own diocesan, the noble and manly Harvey Goodwin, Bishop of Carlisle, thought differently. "Mr. Ruskin's letters," he declared boldly, "are full of suggestive thoughts, and must do anyone good, if only in getting us out of the ruts."

To get us out of the ruts! It is one of the essential functions of the prophets in all times and places. We might possibly dispense with poets: Plato did, in his Republic. Conceivably we might manage toler-

ably well without any more men of science. Painting and sculpture might altogether cease to be, and glorious, beautiful life still remain to us; but our prophets we must have, to arouse, to stimulate, to give us eyes to see, to breathe life into dry bones, to show us how to live. Stagnation, conventionalism, getting into ruts,—these are real dangers to us all. If Ruskin, by gentle words or by rough, can only make us think, can only, in Carlyle's language, “awaken a slumbering blockhead here and there to rub his eyes, and consider what he is about in God's creation,” he will have done his work. Certainly, he is rude and startling enough. “All true Christianity,” he told the clergy in the letters on the Lord's Prayer, “is known in breaking of bread, and all false Christianity in stealing it. Let the clergyman only apply—with impartial and level sweep—to his congregation the great pastoral order: ‘The man that will not work, neither should he eat,’ and he will find an entirely new view of life and its sacraments open upon him and them. For the man who is not—day by day—doing work which will earn his dinner, must be stealing his dinner.”

We might perhaps make allowance for that extraordinary passage. It dates from 1879, from Ruskin's unsound period, after brain mischief had manifested itself. But in one of the clearest, sanest, most valuable of all his books, *The Crown of Wild Olive*, he had in 1866 fiercely assailed, not Christianity indeed, but the modern English version and practice of it. “You knock a man into a ditch,” he says, “and then you tell him to remain content in the ‘position in

which Providence has placed him.' That's modern Christianity."

"We have indeed," he told the merchants of Bradford, "a nominal religion, to which we pay tithes of property and sevenths of time; but we have a practical and earnest religion, to which we devote nine-tenths of our property, and six-sevenths of our time. And we dispute a great deal about the nominal religion, but we are all unanimous about this practical one, of which the ruling goddess may be best generally described as 'the Goddess of Getting On,' or 'Britannia of the Market.'"

"Do justice and judgment," he exclaimed, to an audience of professing Christians in 1865, "that's your Bible order; that's the 'Service of God'—not praying nor psalm-singing. We are impudent enough to call our beggings and chantings 'Divine Service.' Alas! unless we perform Divine Service in every willing act of life, we never perform it at all. The one Divine work—the one ordered sacrifice—is to do justice. . . . Do justice to your brother (you can do that whether you love him or not), and you will come to love him. But do injustice to him, because you don't love him; and you will come to hate him."

Now that may be sound Christian doctrine or not, as you choose to think, but Christianity with Charity as its chief note, and Christianity based upon Justice, which was evidently Ruskin's religion,—tend to be different things. It may be worth while to glance at his religious history, and the steps by which he arrived at his final faith,—a part of his life's record so far insufficiently explored.

He began as an unsectarian Protestant, trained by his mother, who was devoted to Spurgeon, in the most rigid form of Evangelicalism. I say, by his mother, for signs are not wanting that his father, the honest sherry-merchant, although also an extreme Protestant of the late-Georgian type, zealous against the Scarlet Lady of Rome, sat somewhat loosely to his narrow creed. "Both of us," writes Ruskin in one of the delightful asides of *Præterita*, "had a common feeling of being, as compared with my mother, reprobates and worldly characters, despising our birthright like Esau, or cast out for our mocking ways like Ishmael. For my father never ventured to give me a religious lesson: and though he went to church with a resigned countenance, I knew very well that he liked going just as little as I did." For the good and evil alike of Ruskin's religious training, for his splendid and unrivalled command of the Scriptural writings, as well as his sublime ignorance that Leviticus and S. Luke are not of equal inspiration and authority, for the unreflecting faith of his youth and the agonizing doubt of his manhood, and his final revolt against rigid creeds and hide-bound sectarianism, for sanctities and reverences and religious instincts never eradicated, as well as for violent prejudices and repulsions never concealed, Margaret Ruskin, descendant of the Covenanters, must be held chiefly responsible.

Ruskin's religious progression was curiously parallel to that of his own Oxford contemporary and antagonist, afterwards so famous, Frederic Robertson of Brighton; first, narrow Evangelicalism tinged by Calvinist



thought; secondly, recoil, unsettlement and doubt; thirdly, return to faith and acceptance of a liberal Christianity, neither Protestant nor Romanist, wide as the Universal Church, simple and ethical as the Gospels. Neither Tractarianism nor Darwinism nor the movement represented by Arnold and Maurice touched him at all. I know of no stranger episode in modern religious history than the collision of Frederic Maurice and John Ruskin on Old Testament morality. It occurred at a Bible class as late, I think, as the year 1850. "I loved Frederic Maurice," writes the future heretic, "but he was by nature puzzle-headed, and though in a beautiful manner, wrong-headed; while his clear conscience and keen affections made him egotistic, and in his Bible-reading as insolent as any infidel of them all. I only once went to a Bible-lesson of his, and the meeting was significant, and conclusive. The subject of lesson, Jael's slaying of Sisera; concerning which, Maurice, taking an enlightened modern view of what was fit and not, discoursed in passionate indignation; and warned his class, in the most positive and solemn manner, that such dreadful deeds could only have been done in cold blood in the Dark Biblical Ages. . . . At the close of the instruction, through which I sat silent, I ventured to enquire, why then had Deborah the prophetess declared of Jael, 'Blessed above women shall the wife of Heber the Kenite be'? On which Maurice, with startled and flashing eyes, burst out into partly scornful, partly alarmed denunciation of Deborah the prophetess, as a mere blazing Amazon; and of her song as a merely rhythmic storm of battle-

rage, no more to be listened to with edification or faith than the Norman's sword-song at the Battle of Hastings.

"Whereupon there remained nothing for me—to whom the Song of Deborah was as sacred as the Magnificat,—but total collapse in sorrow and astonishment ; the eyes of all the class being also bent on me in amazed reprobation of my benighted views, and unchristian sentiments. And I got away how I could, and never went back."

The Song of Deborah as sacred as the Magnificat ! To a man of intellect and genius too, the author of *Modern Painters*, now thirty-two years of age ! How amazing it seems to us as we look back upon this life ! It was not wonderful that the reaction against his mother's creed, when it came, was extreme and violent. But there was no sign of it yet. Some of you may know a remarkable but little-noticed book of his, dating from this time, 1851, entitled *Notes on the Construction of Sheepfolds*. Its fanciful name, altogether characteristic of Ruskin, is said to have induced its purchase by many enterprising Lowland farmers of Scotland keen for agricultural improvements ! Their feelings and their language when they found that the book was a theological treatise on Church government, a plea for the union of all Protestant bodies on the basis of Low-Church Episcopacy, may perhaps be more fittingly imagined than described. We note only that in 1851 he had no thought or care for any form of Christianity save Protestantism. "Puseyites and Roman Catholics were still," as he admits, "heathen-men and publicans" to

him. Then a lovely illuminated missal of the fourteenth century came into his hands, and he made the discovery that "all beautiful prayers were Catholic—all wise interpretations of the Bible, Catholic." For many years Mediæval Art and Architecture had been silently undermining his early faith and revealing to him worlds unknown to John Knox. Contact with bigoted Protestant Waldensians in Italy, preaching that the world was accursed, and they alone the elect, revolted his soul. Intimate friendship with Italian peasants, Christ's lowly patient folk in the Apennines, made him tolerant of Christian beliefs other than his own. Especially his reverence for womanhood made it easy for him to sympathize with the idea of the Madonna. "I am persuaded," he wrote late in life, in *Fors Clavigera*, "that the worship of the Madonna has never been otherwise than productive of true holiness of life and purity of character. There has probably not been an innocent cottage home throughout the length and breadth of Europe during the whole period of vital Christianity, in which the imagined presence of the Madonna has not given sanctity to the humblest duties, and comfort to the sorest trials of the lives of women."

Why then, we ask, did he not become a Roman Catholic? For years it was thought that he would go over. The Roman Church in England expected it: Cardinal Manning strove hard to win such a distinguished convert, but all in vain. In 1858 he had put away, as he says, his Evangelical beliefs, to be debated of no more. A long period of religious struggle and doubt followed, the facts of which have

not yet been revealed to us, save one indeed, that Ruskin, shaken, disillusioned amid the crash and fall of his inherited faiths, stood in far greater danger of utter unbelief than of conversion to Roman Catholicism. One of his disciples, who understood him well, the brilliant author of that inimitable book *The New Republic*, has admirably portrayed for us Ruskin's attitude of mind during the middle period, the troubled, doubting, pathetically faithful period of his religious experience. "For I," said Mr. Herbert, "who am I that speak to you? Am I a believer? No, I am a doubter too. Once I could pray every morning, and go forth to my day's labour stayed and comforted. But now I can pray no longer. You have taken my God away from me, and I know not where you have laid Him. My only consolation in my misery is that at least I am inconsolable for His loss. Yes," cried Mr. Herbert, his voice rising into a kind of threatening wail, "though you have made me miserable, I am not yet content with my misery. And though I too have said in my heart that there is no God, and that there is no more profit in wisdom than in folly, yet there is one folly that I will not give tongue to. I will not say 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace. I will only pray that if there be a Father, He may have mercy alike upon those that hate Him because they will not see Him, and on those who love and long for Him although they no longer can see Him."

He emerged at last from Doubting Castle and the Slough of Despond, returned, not perhaps to the fold of the Church,—but "to the footstool of the Father."

"I was, am, and can be," he wrote in 1887, "only a Christian Catholic in the wide and eternal sense. I have been that these 25 years at least. Heaven keep me from being less as I grow older! But I am no more likely to become a Roman Catholic than a Quaker, Evangelical, or Turk." It is useless to try to label Ruskin or classify his religion. He had no heart or care for the divisions amongst Christians, no interest whatsoever in half the controversies which still agitate the religious world. "No religion was worth considering," he held, "that is not daily founded on rational, effective, humble and helpful action." The quarrels and rivalries of the Churches were alike puerile and hateful. "There is a true Church," he taught, in *Sesame and Lilies*, "wherever one hand meets another helpfully, and that is the only Holy or Mother Church which ever was or ever shall be." "At every moment of our lives we should be trying to find out, not in what we differ with other people, but in what we agree with them; and the moment we can agree as to anything that should be done, kind or good (and who but fools couldn't?) then do it; push at it together; you can't quarrel in a side-by-side push; but the moment that even the best men stop pushing and begin talking they mistake their pugnacity for piety, . . . and it's all over."

Definitely, however, it may be demanded, what were John Ruskin's settled, final beliefs? He believed in God, in Christ, in Immortality, in Labour, in Joy, in Purity. That was his Faith. Is it Christianity? I do not know how orthodox theology will judge, but this I know: If by miracle the

civilized world should suddenly adopt his teaching, should think and live as John Ruskin thought and lived, then without doubt that bright Kingdom of God, which we have despaired of, and relegated to a far-off future and another world, would be swiftly realized here and now. It is the task of a prophet, if that word has any meaning at all, to reveal to us, not in vague generalities, but in clear detail, how we may establish on earth a true 'Civitas Dei,' create around us a veritable Kingdom of God. What the most earnest and faithful Christians of to-day most desire to know, the problem of all others upon which they seek guidance and light—I believe your hearts will respond as I say it—is, *how to live*; how amid the complex civilization of modern days to obey the commandments of our Master; how to translate faithfully and fearlessly, avoiding unintelligent literalism on the one hand and emasculation on the other, the Christianity of the Sermon on the Mount into terms of Twentieth-Century, every-day, English life. The vast majority of us in this hall to-night, I suppose, acknowledge the name of Christian. What, then, do we consider, should be our attitude towards war, towards rich and poor, towards knowledge, art, nature; as regards such common problems as luxury, self-culture, marriage, commerce, citizenship, and the like? Is our religion in the main what Carlyle called it, 'the Worship of Sorrow,' or is it a religion of Joy? Is it essentially pessimist, like Buddhism, or a creed of inspiring, everlasting Hope? Ought we to follow St. Bernard and St. Bruno, accept asceticism or its modern equivalent, Puritanism? or

is there a higher vision still, that of St. Francis of Assisi, or of Sir Thomas More, or even of John Ruskin? To these three, as exponents of Christian life, I for one have learnt to give fullest admiration and respect, especially to the last of the three. Amid all mistakes—and no thinker on these vital and sacred matters who does not make mistakes will ever make anything—amid all his failings and eccentricities and violences, Ruskin seems to me to have attained nearest to the truth. “Let every one,” said Henry VIII, when he was still a noble and generous-hearted man, speaking of Dean Colet, “let every one have his own doctor, and let every one favour his own; this man is the doctor for me.” That does not mean that he is to be regarded as an infallible Pope, or to be accorded blind allegiance. “No true disciple of mine,” he wrote in *St. Mark’s Rest*, “will ever be a Ruskinian; he will follow, not me, but the instincts of his own soul, and the guidance of its Creator.” We have always to distinguish, as Matthew Arnold said, “between Mr. Ruskin exercising his genius, and Mr. Ruskin exercising his intelligence.” He may be entirely mistaken in denouncing interest as usury and three per cent. as a crime, and yet generally right in his criticisms of modern life. His artistic temperament may have led him to unbalanced views respecting machinery and railways; his pure religious instincts may have dictated a noble Gospel of honest work, simplicity, love of God, and service of man.

“Love of God, Service of Man!” I can almost imagine that I hear an indignant voice in your midst

protesting : "He was no Christian prophet ; he was a violent apologist and eulogist of War. He thought the soldier's career nobler than that of the peaceful merchant. In *Modern Painters*, written when the Crimean conflict was raging, he said, 'I believe War is at present productive of good more than of evil.' He was young then, no doubt, and had much to learn and to unlearn ; but in a lecture to soldiers at Woolwich in the year 1865, in the decade which witnessed the maturity of his magnificent powers, he uttered that false and un-Christian and monstrous sentence : 'We talk of peace and civilization ; but I have found that those were not the words which the Muse of History coupled together : that, on her lips, the words were—peace and sensuality,—peace and selfishness,—peace and death.' By such teaching as that he has done his part as false prophet in obscuring the right and adding fuel to the insane war fury of our time. Christian teacher forsooth ! nay, eloquent, mischievous defender of the hideous game of War rather ; deserving, if any writer ever did, the malediction of the good Sir Arthur Helps, his friend,—' And oh ! my God ! how I wish some of those who are the prime causers of all this agony could themselves suffer some of the agony they cause ! ' "

Well, here is a real difficulty, and it must be encountered and fought. You will hardly permit me, in so crucial a matter, to imitate the Scottish minister involved in a scriptural fix,—“Friends, we will look this difficulty squarely in the face . . . and pass on.” Nor have I any such intention. Contrary to the popular impression, and in the teeth of one or two



extreme or careless sayings, I am prepared to maintain the essential rightness of Ruskin's position regarding War, and that no man of letters in our day, save Tolstoi, has written more earnestly and sternly against it. Contradictions there are, no doubt. He himself admitted them: nearly all wise and noble hearts experience them about War. He had boundless reverence for the profession which beyond most others is rooted in self-sacrifice. The finest men of the past, Aurelius, Alfred, S. Louis, had been soldiers; the finest characters he knew in the present, Havelock, Outram, Sir Herbert Edwards, Gordon, were soldiers. He had been trained by Homer and Sir Walter Scott, and loved chivalry and brave deeds. How his old blue eyes would have flamed into passionate admiration at the story of those two gunners of ours at the disaster of Colenso! overwhelmed but disdaining to fly, coolly, amid the fiery hail, serving their guns to the last useless round of case-shot; then—with what thought Heaven knows, possibly only a dumb instinct of soldierly discipline—possibly with dim faith that by so madly casting away their lives they could aid England best,—standing at attention to be riddled by Boer bullets,—and so departing.

But what was his doctrine about War itself? Firstly, he denied that all War is un-Christian. Secondly, he asserted that nearly all modern wars were not only un-Christian but ignoble, stupid, and in every way mischievous. Thirdly—and this was his main position—all wars are unjustifiable save those fought in pure self-defence, or in aid of the oppressed. He railed at England for refusing to go to the help of

down-trodden Poland, Italy, Denmark. I doubt not he would have risked the whole Empire to save Armenia. "Do I know how dreadful a thing war is?" he wrote in 1863. "Yes, truly, I know it. I like war as ill as most people: yet I would have the country go to war, with haste, in a good quarrel; and, which is perhaps eccentric in me, rather in another's quarrel than in her own. We say of ourselves complacently that we will not go to war for an idea; but the phrase interpreted means only, that we will go to war for a bale of goods, but not for justice nor mercy."

Furthermore, Ruskin's approval of War was limited by one stern limitation, that the makers of War should do their own fighting as in the olden days, not hire poor men at a shilling a day to do it for them. "Judge if it will always be necessary," he said, "to put your quarrel into the hearts of your poor, and sign your treaties with peasants' blood." And in that very lecture of the *Crown of Wild Olive* which has been so reprobated,—as for example by Mr. Hobson in his admirable book on Ruskin,—this reputed eulogist of battle and conflict turned fiercely upon women for not putting an end to them. "You fancy that you are sorry for the pain of others. I tell you that if the usual course of war, instead of unroofing peasants' cottages, merely broke the china upon your own drawing-room tables, no war in civilized countries would last a week."

You are weary of this. Let me make an end and throw down my challenge. I have read, I believe, every word that John Ruskin has written about war, and for every passage of his of modified approval of

it under certain conditions that can be adduced, I will furnish ten of unreserved, whole-hearted denunciation. Eulogist of War forsooth ! Who was it that wrote of "the myriad-handed murder of multitudes, done boastfully in the daylight, by the frenzy of nations, and the immeasurable, unimaginable guilt heaped up from hell to heaven of their priests and kings" ? Who was it that gave us the famous Dream Parable of War and its wisdom, known and loved by every boy and girl in the village where I inhabit ?

"I dreamed that I was at a child's May Day party, in which every means of entertainment had been provided for them, by a wise and kind host. It was in a stately house, with beautiful gardens attached to it ; and the children had been set free in the rooms and gardens, with no care whatever but how to pass their afternoon rejoicingly. They did not, indeed, know much about what was to happen next day ; and some of them, I thought, were a little frightened because there was a chance of their being sent to a new school where there were examinations ; but they kept the thoughts of that out of their heads as well as they could, and resolved to enjoy themselves. The house, I said, was in a beautiful garden, and in the garden were all kinds of flowers ; sweet, grassy banks for rest ; and smooth lawns for play ; and pleasant streams and woods ; and rocky places for climbing. And the children were happy for a little while, but presently they separated themselves into parties ; and then each party declared it would have a piece of the garden for its own, and that none of the others should have anything to do with that piece. Next, they quarrelled

violently which pieces they would have ; and at last the boys took up the thing, as boys should do, 'practically,' and fought in the flower-beds till there was hardly a flower left standing ; then they trampled down each other's bits of garden out of spite ; and the girls cried till they could cry no more ; and so they all lay down at last breathless in the ruin, and waited for the time when they were to be taken home in the evening."

On the whole that is the queerest eulogy of war, one thinks, in modern literature.

You will remember, perhaps, whence the Dream Parable comes. It is to be found in the most memorable lecture Ruskin ever delivered, on *The Mystery of Life and its Arts*, a work of his which has seemed to me for twenty years past perhaps the most priceless treasure in all his writings. Mr. Leslie Stephen, in a recent criticism, praises it highly. "It is, to my mind," he says, "the most perfect of his essays. Perhaps I am a little prejudiced by its confession, franker than usual, of the melancholy conviction that, after all, life is a mystery, and no solution really satisfactory. It is a good bit of pessimism, especially if you omit the moral at the end."

No one surely but a philosopher could have discovered that Ruskin was a melancholy thinker and a pessimist. Nothing truly could be gloomier or more sombre than his analysis of modern English society and life, but he was no more a pessimist than his thirteenth century prototype, S. Francis of Assisi. "I trust in the living God,"—so ran the creed of S. George's Guild which he founded—"I trust in the

kindness of His law and the goodness of His work. I trust in the nobleness of human nature—in the majesty of its faculties, the fulness of its mercy, and the joy of its love.” Ruskin indeed tried occasionally to be a philosopher, but like Dr. Johnson’s friend he found that somehow “cheerfulness was always breaking in.” His message to England is nothing if not a Gospel of Hope. “To fill this little island with true friends—men wise, brave, and happy! Are we to think that the earth was only shaped to be a globe of torture; and that there cannot be one spot of it where peace can rest, or justice reign? Where are men ever to be happy, if not in England? Are we not of a race among the strong ones of the earth; the blood in us incapable of weariness, unconquerable by grief? Have we not a history of which we can hardly think without becoming insolent in our just pride of it? Is it so impossible, think you, after the world’s eighteen hundred years of Christianity, and our own thousand years of toil, to fill only this little white gleaming crag with happy creatures, helpful to each other? Must we remain here also savage—at enmity with each other—foodless, houseless, in rags, in dust, and without hope? Do not think it. It is infidelity, infidelity not to God only, but to every creature and every law that He has made.”

Nothing indeed was more alien from Ruskin’s spirit than pessimism—most of all that sickly, sentimental, morbid form of it which commonly springs from having too much money, too much culture, too much pleasure, and no work on earth to do. Here is his remarkable declaration on Modern Pessimism, which

I daresay will be fresh to many of you. It is buried away in a file of *The Times* newspaper of the year 1876. Ostensibly it is an art criticism on the work of a charming painter, Frederic Walker: really, it is a sermon on ancient and modern philosophy. Ruskin exalted Frederic Walker's artistic genius, but lamented his sad symbolism, "his adherence to Justice Shallow's sublime theology, that 'all shall die.'"

"That theology has indeed been preached by stronger men, again and again, from Horace's day to our own," he wrote, "but never to so little purpose. 'Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die,' said, wisely in his way, the Latin farmer: ate his beans and bacon in comfort, had his suppers of the gods on the fair earth, with his servants jesting around the table, and left eternal monuments of earthly wisdom and of song.

"Let us labour and be just, for to-morrow we die, and after Death the Judgment,' said Holbein and Dürer, and left eternal monuments of upright human toil and honourable gloom of godly fear.

"Let us rejoice and be exceeding glad, for to-morrow we die, and shall be with God,' said Angelico and Giotto, and left eternal monuments of divinely-blazoned heraldry of Heaven.

"Let us smoke pipes, make money, read bad novels, walk in bad air, and say sentimentally how sick we are in the afternoon, for to-morrow we die, and shall be made ourselves clay-pipes,' says the modern world, and drags this poor bright painter, Frederic Walker, down into the abyss with it, vainly clutching at a handful or two of scent and flowers in the May gardens."

Had Ruskin then no sympathy with those unhappy sincere souls who, by no fault of their own, because their lot was cast in an age of doubt and revolutionary discovery that shook the heavens and the earth, have lost their faith in God and a life to come? Does his teaching pre-suppose Christian belief? Has he no message for the Agnostic and the Doubter?

It is not so. He himself had passed, as did so many of his great contemporaries, through the Valley of the Shadow of religious despair, had himself been compelled to face the dread questions: *For* what shall a man live, *by* what can he live, if the only credible future is eternal sleep? and he had found an answer. Christians might disregard his cry for social justice. Not so the unbelievers. "Might not a preacher," he said, in his magnificent preface to the *Crown of Wild Olive*, "in comfortless, but faithful zeal say to them thus: Hear me, you dying men, who will soon be deaf for ever. For these others, at your right hand and your left, these Christians who look forward to a state of infinite existence: for these, indeed, it may be permissible to waste their numbered moments, through faith in a future of innumerable hours. In *them* it may be no sign of hardness of heart to neglect the poor, over whom they know their Master is watching; and to leave those to perish temporarily, who cannot perish eternally. But for *you* there is no such hope, and therefore no such excuse. This fate, which you ordain for the wretched, you believe to be all their inheritance; they and you, as you think, shall lie down together in the dust, and the worms cover you. Is it therefore

easier for you, in your heart, to inflict the sorrow for which there is no remedy? Will you take, wantonly, this little all of his life from your brother, and make his brief hours long to him with pain? Will you be more prompt to the injustice which can never be redressed, and more niggardly of the mercy which you can bestow but once, and which, refusing, you refuse for ever?" That is the 'Everlasting Yea' of John Ruskin.

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One word more,—if your patience is not exhausted,—upon a dangerous subject, and then I have done. It is a topic upon which most of us are extremely sensitive, and no doubt it would be more prudent to leave it alone; but I am growing old—and reckless. I have passed fifteen long years in your service, have offended you often by plain speech, and if I offend once again, you will pardon me, and pity me for not knowing better.

Ruskin will stand or fall as prophet and ethical teacher by his doctrines concerning Money—money-getting and money-spending. He believed that Wealth-worship was eating out the heart of the English, both here and in America. He held that our Christianity, whatever we may say or think, is being day by day undermined by idolatry, and that Mammon is our idol. He agreed with Plato, "The citizen must be happy and good, but very rich and very good at the same time he cannot be." It was his fixed conviction that it is, and for ever will be,



hard for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. He asserted that the nobler Barons of the Middle Ages had their counterpart and parallel in the millionaires and great capitalists of to-day, only their robberies were open, not occult, and that our whole social economy was based on the most flagrant and flagitious injustice. He dared to ask all rich men a most impertinent question, not, how much they distributed in charity, not, how they expended their wealth, but how they got it. They refuse discreetly to answer. "Dick Turpin is blamed," he writes in the fulminating pages of *Fors Clavigera*, "by some plain-minded person, for consuming the means of other people's living. 'Nay,' says Turpin to the plain-minded person, 'observe how beneficently and pleasantly I spend whatever I get.' 'Yes, sir,' persists the plain-minded person, 'but how do you get it?' 'The question,' says Dick, 'is insidious and irrelevant!' So Ruskin supplies the answer himself, in terms sufficiently direct and startling. "No man," he proclaims to an astonished plutocratic age, "ever became, or can become, largely rich merely by labour and economy. . . . Persons desiring to be rich, and accumulating riches, always hate God and never fear Him; the idol they do fear (for many of them are sincerely religious) is an imaginary or mind-sculptured God of their own making, to their own liking.

"In a community regulated only by laws of demand and supply, but protected from open violence, the people who become rich are, generally speaking, industrious, resolute, proud, covetous, prompt, methodical, sensible, unimaginative, insensitive, and . . . .

ignorant. The people who remain poor are the entirely foolish, the entirely wise, the idle, the reckless, the humble, the thoughtful, the dull, the imaginative, the irregularly and impulsively wicked, the clumsy knave, the open thief, and . . . the entirely merciful, just, and godly person."

What a message is that for wealth-loving, wealth-be-ridden England and America of to-day! What wonder is it that modern society rejects this prophet, scorns him, whom it cannot confute, as a fanatic and a madman? "British Society," it has been well said, "can overlook murder, or swindling—it never forgives the preaching of a new Gospel."

Yet here and there, quiet students of life and its deepest problems, nauseated with the blatant vulgarity of modern money-worship, shocked by the hideous contrasts in the most professedly Christian communities of ostentatious, wasteful luxury and grinding poverty, unable to bow the knee to Napoleons of finance and successful speculators, and the Grand Masters of the Art of Gambling whose praise is daily in our newspapers, turn, to their infinite refreshment, to Ruskin's Utopia. He believed with Plato,—“In Heaven there is laid up a pattern of such a city; and he who desires may behold it, and beholding, govern himself accordingly.” In this Republic of Ruskin's—hopeless, unattainable just now, but as certain to come as the sun of to-morrow—there are neither rich nor poor. There is no liberty to starve, nor opportunity to rob under the forms of law. There is no carking care of the workman, nor sated luxury of the fashionable idler. Every

man and every woman there bears a share of toil, but none toils too hard. Every human creature in it would know and exercise some lovely handicraft. Every child would be educated up to its wits, and none beyond its wits. "Every peasant would be able to build his own cottage—to build it to his own mind—and have a mind to build it to." Abominations of desolation, like our modern cities, would be unknown, and all the wise would love the country, not the machine-made town. All natural beauty would be revered as the gift and handiwork of God Himself: all unnatural, artificial pleasures, discountenanced. In the purest joys of Art and Music and Thought and Literature all would share. Religion, too, would be joyous, and God glorified in the happiness of His children. No harsh asceticism, whether of monk or money-lover, should cramp and sadden human life: no dark shadow of Doubt shut out the vision of the Father in Heaven and Eternal Life to come.

All a dream, all impossible? Yes, so long as we blind our eyes, so long as we are in love with ugliness and cannot recognize true beauty, whether in Nature or in morals. "I never saw a sunset look like that, Mr. Turner," once said a lady, wise in her own conceit and power of vision. "No, madam," replied the painter, "but don't you wish you could?" It is John Ruskin, above all others, who in this age has given us eyes to see the truth. Ah! I would that I might have all my life over again and try to live as he has taught. It makes me mad to think of the joy and beauty and peace and happiness that will come into the world when the words of this despised

teacher are known, and understood, and obeyed. Cannot we, students of Oxford, at least honour his memory by giving him,—dead, what he never knew in life, a patient, fearless, unbiassed hearing? We are crying out, in this leaderless time, for a Captain to deliver us from our Egyptian bondage of materialism and guide us to the Promised Land; and all the while, our Leader is here!

Face to face as we are this day, at the opening of the twentieth century after Christ,—in a world more and more dominated by bestial competitive strife and base ideals,—with the ignoblest tyranny the earth has beheld since tyrants were, the overweening, menacing, cruel might of swollen Capitalism: our souls revolted at last by the Mammon-worship that degrades, and the mad luxury that hardens and embrutes:—stretching forth our hands to the Golden Age when the poor shall be blessed indeed, and the rich not live accursedly:—are there not some few of us who can hear and receive the message of this, the bravest of our prophets, this dreamer of God-given visions, this doer of Christ-like deeds?

“All real and wholesome enjoyments possible to man have been just as possible to him, since first he was made of the earth, as they are now, and they are possible to him chiefly in peace. To watch the corn grow, and the blossoms set; to draw hard breath over ploughshare or spade; to read, to think, to love, to hope, to pray—these are the things that make men happy.”

And finally, Ruskin's last word to you to-night,—  
“Free-heartedness and graciousness, and undisturbed

trust and requited love, and the sight of the peace of others, and the ministry of their pain ; these,—and the blue sky above you, and the sweet waters and flowers of the earth beneath ; and mysteries, and presences innumerable, of living things—may yet be here your riches ; untormenting and divine ; serviceable for the life that now is ; nor, it may be, without promise of that which is to come.”

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